

Message Text

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TAGS: ELAB, UK
SUBJECT: FIREMEN'S STRIKE DRAGS ON: GOVERNMENT AND
TUC -- TOGETHER BUT DIFFERENT: OTHERS
WATCH

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SUMMARY: FOLLOWING A MEETING WITH THE PRIME MINISTER
AND APPEALS TO THE TUC FOR SUPPORT, THE FIREMEN'S
STRIKE REMAINS THE CENTRAL ISSUE IN THE GOVERNMENT'S
ATTEMPTS TO RETAIN ITS VOLUNTARY PAY POLICY. THE IN-
TENT OF CALLAGHAN'S RESPONSE SEEMS TO BE THAT THIS IS
NO TIME FOR "SPECIAL CASES", THAT THE GOVERNMENT

RECOGNIZES THERE ARE HARDSHIPS AND ANOMALIES IN THE PAY STRUCTURE, BUT THAT THE NATION'S ECONOMIC STRATEGY MUST STILL GIVE PRIORITY TO COUNTER INFLATION IN THE INTERESTS OF BRITAIN'S LONG-TERM ECONOMIC HEALTH. THUS TO THE FIREMEN (WITH THE REST OF THE NATION WATCHING) CALLAGHAN PERSISTED IN HOLDING FAST TO PRESENT PAY GUIDELINES WHILE HOLDING OUT HOPE FOR A PHASED INCREASE IN WAGES OVER THE NEXT SEVERAL YEARS. AND HE SHOWED NO INCLINATION TO AGREE TO COSMETIC SOLUTIONS WHICH WOULD OPEN THE WAY TO CYNICAL WAGE SETTLEMENTS THAT WOULD MEET THE FORM BUT UNDERMINE THE SUBSTANCE OF THE WAGE RESTRAINT POLICY.

GENERALLY CIRCUMSTANCES ARE MOVING AGAINST THE FIREMEN AS THE MILITARY IMPROVE THEIR FIREFIGHTING SKILLS WITH PRACTICE, AND EMERGENCY CALLOUTS REMAIN FEWER THAN IS CUSTOMARY FOR THIS TIME OF YEAR. THE FIRE BRIGADES UNION (FBU) NOW OFFICIALLY HAS CALLED UPON THE TUC FOR ASSISTANCE. THE TUC CAN BE EXPECTED TO REMIND THE GOVERNMENT OF ITS INDEPENDENCE AND DIFFERENCES IN THEIR WAGE RESTRAINT POLICIES, BUT IT WILL NOT WANT TO APPEAR TO BREAK WITH THE LABOR GOVERNMENT. GENERAL COUNCIL MEMBERS,(LIKE CALLAGHAN),PRIVATELY STATE THE STRIKERS CANNOT BE ALLOWED TO SUCCEED IN FORCING THROUGH THEIR 30 PERCENT WAGE CLAIM, NOR ARE THEY WILLING TO FACE THE CONTUMELY OF THEIR CONSTITUENTS WHO HAVE ALREADY SETTLED WITHIN THE GOVERNMENT'S LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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PAY GUIDELINE. ALTHOUGH THE STRIKE IS NOW THREE WEEKS OLD AND CHRISTMAS IS APPROACHING, IT IS DIFFICULT TO PREDICT HOW LONG THE STRIKERS WILL CONTINUE IN VIEW OF THEIR IMPRESSIVE SOLIDARITY. MEANWHILE, FIRE DAMAGE IS BEING WELL CONTROLLED BY SERVICEMEN, THE GOVERNMENT'S HAND IS BEING STRENGTHENED EVERY DAY, AND THERE IS A LONG QUEUE OF PUBLIC SERVICE EMPLOYEES (LOCAL AND NATIONAL) AS WELL AS SOME IN THE PRIVATE SECTOR WAITING TO SEE HOW THE FIREMEN'S DISPUTE PLAYS ITSELF OUT SO AS TO DECIDE ON THEIR OWN FUTURE TACTICS. END SUMMARY.

1. THE FIREMEN'S STRIKE CONTINUES FOLLOWING A WEEK IN WHICH THE FIRE BRIGADES UNION (FBU) HAS BEEN INVOLVED IN A MEETING WITH THE PRIME MINISTER AND HAS APPEALED TO THE TRADES UNION CONGRESS (TUC) FOR SUPPORT. THE MEETING OF THE FBU EXECUTIVE WITH MR. CALLAGHAN ON NOVEMBER 29 PRODUCED NO IMMEDIATE SETTLEMENT BUT PROVIDED THE OPPORTUNITY FOR THE PM TO PERSONALLY REITERATE HIS ARGUMENT THAT THE FIREMEN COULD NOT WIN. AS THE STRIKE PROGRESSES THIS ARGUMENT HAS GATHERED WEIGHT. THE MILITARY FIREFIGHTERS ARE NOW BECOMING

MORE EFFICIENT, AND GOVERNMENT CAMPAIGNS IN THE PRESS AND TV ON FIRE PREVENTION HAVE REDUCED THE NUMBER OF FIRES THAT HAVE OCCURRED. COUPLED WITH THE FACT THAT FIREMEN HAVE RESPONDED TO CALLS THAT THREATEN LIFE, THIS HAS REDUCED THE IMPACT OF THE STRIKE. THOUGH

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THE SUPPORT OF THE PUBLIC HAS BEEN EXPRESSED IN A NUMBER OF WAYS (INCLUDING STREET COLLECTIONS TO ASSIST STRIKERS), THERE APPEARS TO BE A GROWING REALIZATION THAT THE GOVERNMENT IS NOT PREPARED TO HAVE ITS HAND FORCED OVER THE ISSUE. SOME UNIONS HAVE GIVEN THE FBU DONATIONS, BUT HAVE GIVEN NO JOB ACTION SUPPORT. THE GOVERNMENT HAS INDEED TAKEN EVERY OPPORTUNITY TO DEMONSTRATE IT WILL RESIST EFFORTS FOR CLAIMS TO BE TREATED AS "SPECIAL CASES" -- A POSTURE

TAKEN UP BY THE TUC. EACH CLAIM WILL HAVE TO BE
NEGOTIATED ON ITS MERITS WITHIN THE PAY GUIDELINES.
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IN THE MEANTIME, IN EFFECT THE TUC PLAYS THE
ROLE OF MEDIATOR.

2. IN A STATEMENT RELEASED FROM DOWNING STREET FOLLOWING TUESDAY'S MEETING, MR. CALLAGHAN INDICATED THE AREAS THAT ARE STILL NEGOTIABLE IN THE EFFORTS TO END THE DISPUTE. HE STRESSED THAT A NEGOTIATED AGREEMENT ON THE REDUCTION OF HOURS COULD BE PHASED IN UNDER THE PAY POLICY AND, MORE IMPORTANTLY, SUGGESTED THAT THE EMPLOYERS AND THE FIREMEN WORK OUT A FORMULA TO FIX FIREMEN'S PAY FOR "A SUBSTANTIAL PERIOD AHEAD", AN UNPRECEDENTED, IF VAGUE, UNDERTAKING THAT MIGHT EXEMPT FIREMEN IN PART FROM FUTURE WAGE FREEZES. STRESSING THE GOVERNMENT'S "PRINCIPAL MANDATE", TO OVERCOME INFLATION, CALLAGHAN ARGUED THAT ONLY 3 PERCENT OF WAGE NEGOTIATIONS HAVE SO FAR BEEN SETTLED AND THAT MANY GROUPS IN BOTH THE PUBLIC AND THE PRIVATE SECTORS ARE AWAITING THE FIREMEN'S SETTLEMENT WITH THE INTENTION OF CLAIMING SIMILAR LEVELS OF INCREASE.

3. THE FIREMEN'S CASE FORCED ON THE TUC "THE MOMENT OF TRUTH" IN RECONCILING THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN ITS VERSION OF WAGE RESTRAINT AND THAT OF THE GOVERNMENT. THE SEPTEMBER BLACKPOOL CONGRESS MADE NO COMMITMENT TO A 10 PERCENT EARNINGS LIMIT BUT ONLY TO A 12-MONTH RULE BETWEEN PRINCIPAL ("MODERATE") SETTLEMENTS, AND AN "ORDERLY" RETURN TO "FREE COLLECTIVE BARGAINING". THE TUC HAS SO FAR SUCCESSFULLY CONFINED ITSELF TO BACKSTAGE EFFORTS TO ACHIEVE A SETTLEMENT BUT HAS NOW HAD TO TAKE A PUBLIC POSITION, PARTICULARLY SINCE IT HAD PLEDGED ITSELF TO PROTECT PUBLIC EMPLOYEES FROM BEARING THE BRUNT OF WAGE RESTRAINT. NEVERTHELESS, THE TRADE UNION LEADERS WHO ARE HEAVILY INVOLVED IN
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THESE ATTEMPTS ARE IN MANY CASES THOSE WHOSE MEMBERS MAY WISH TO TAKE A CUE FROM THE FIREMEN TO ACHIEVE HIGHER THAN GUIDELINE SETTLEMENTS. THE GENERAL COUNCIL IS STILL EXERTING PRESSURE ON PARRY TO FIND A WAY TO CONVINCE THE RANK AND FILE TO TERMINATE THE STRIKE. BUT SUCCESS ON HIS PART REMAINS DOUBTFUL IN VIEW OF LIKELY RECRIMINATIONS AMONG HIS MEMBERS, THAT

THEY HAVE BEEN SOLD OUT BY THE TUC. THE MEMBERSHIP IS STILL DRIVEN HEAVILY BY BITTERNESS AND A CERTAIN NAIVETE ABOUT THE REALITIES OF NEGOTIATION AND TRADE UNION POWER. CIRCUMSTANCES ARE MOVING AGAINST THE FIREMEN; IF THEY ARE EVENTUALLY FORCED INTO A SETTLEMENT THAT CAN BE SEEN AS A GOVERNMENT VICTORY, THE PAY POLICY WOULD HAVE RECEIVED SOMETHING OF A BOOST -- AND THE GOVERNMENT MAY ONE DAY BE RATHER GRATEFUL THAT IT WAS PRESENTED WITH THE OPPORTUNITY TO DEMONSTRATE ITS RESOLVE AGAINST A POORLY-ORGANIZED AND INEXPERIENCED TRADE UNION LIKE THE FBU. DEFEAT IS NOT LIKELY TO SCARE SOME OF THE "BIG BATTALIONS" AWAY FROM A CHALLENGE -- BUT IT WILL HAVE SHOWN THEM THE STRENGTH OF THE GOVERNMENT'S HAND AGAINST A GROUP WHICH HAS AN ELEMENT OF PUBLIC SYMPATHY (A COMMODITY NOT ENJOYED IN LARGE MEASURE BY MINERS, CIVIL SERVANTS AND THE LIKE).

4. MEANWHILE THE WAGE CLAIM QUEUE IS LENGTHENING, WITH NO SINGLE PATTERN EMERGING. SOME UNIONS ARE REFLECTING THEIR DISSATISFACTION IN CURRENT DISPUTES, OTHERS ARE ENGAGED IN THREATENING RHETORIC OVER POSSIBLE CLAIMS, WHILE A THIRD GROUP IS WATCHING AND WAITING. ALREADY A THREE-MONTH OVERTIME BAN AT BRITAIN'S SWAN HUNTER SHIPYARD OVER A LONGSTANDING DIFFERENTIALS DISPUTE IS CAUSING BITTERNESS WITHIN THE YARD'S WORKFORCE. THE DISPUTE MAY COST SWAN HUNTER A 50-MILLION-POUND POLISH SHIP ORDER, JEOPARDIZING THE JOBS OF OTHERS NOT IN THE LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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DISPUTE WHO FEAR THAT SWAN HUNTER'S INABILITY TO GUARANTEE DELIVERY MAY COST JOBS AND PROSPECTS FOR FUTURE ORDERS ON THE DEPRESSED TYNESIDE. A HALF MILLION CIVIL SERVICE UNION MEMBERS ARE WARNING

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OF "CHAOS" IF 1978 WAGE DETERMINATION IS LEFT TO
OPEN NEGOTIATION PENDING THE REESTABLISHMENT OF AN
INDEPENDENT PAY RESEARCH UNIT FOR WAGE DETERMINATION
(BASED ON COMPARABILITY WITH OUTSIDE EMPLOYMENT)
PROMISED BY THE GOVERNMENT FOR 1979. THE MINERS ARE
ENGAGED IN BITTER INTERNAL FEUDING AS INDIVIDUAL
MINING DISTRICTS ARE MAKING UNDER-THE-TABLE PRODUC-
TIVITY DEALS TO GET MORE CASH BEFORE CHRISTMAS
DESPITE THE DEFEAT OF THE PRODUCTIVITY DEAL BALLOT.
IT NOW APPEARS THAT PRESIDENT JOE GORMLEY'S PIT-BY-PIT
PERSONAL CAMPAIGN IN PRACTICE MAY RESULT IN A
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REVERSAL OF THE NUM POLICY (AND ARTHUR SCARGILL'S
VICTORY). THE NUM EXECUTIVE IS NOW EXPECTED TO ALLOW
DISTRICTS TO NEGOTIATE PRODUCTIVITY DEALS IF THEY
WISH -- A PRACTICE WHICH MAY BECOME WIDESPREAD IN THE
INDUSTRY. THE POWER WORKERS ARE MAKING THREATENING
NOISES ABOUT PRESENTING A LARGE WAGE CLAIM IN THE
NEW YEAR. AND FLEET STREET IS EMBROILED IN A MAJOR
CONFLICT INVOLVING BRITAIN'S LARGEST DAILY (THE
MIRROR) OVER THE INTRODUCTION OF NEW TECHNOLOGY WHICH
MAY MAKE NEWSPAPERS CONSIDERABLY LESS VULNERABLE TO
STRIKES THAN BEFORE.

5. SUMMED UP, THE FIRE BRIGADES UNION IS GETTING LITTLE MORE THAN SYMPATHY AND SOME FUNDS TO COVER ADMINISTRATIVE EXPENSES FOR ITS STRIKE. THE UNION IS FACED WITH ACCEPTING AN OFFER WITHIN THE GOVERNMENT'S PAY GUIDELINES, AND IT HAS NO SIGNIFICANT TRADE UNION OR POLITICAL SUPPORT THAT WILL ENABLE THE STRIKE TO SUCCEED IN A WAY THAT WOULD BREAK CALLAGHAN'S WAGE POLICY. ONLY 3 PERCENT OF WAGE NEGOTIATIONS IN THE CURRENT ROUND HAS BEEN SETTLED, WITH THE OTHERS STILL DEPENDENT ON WHAT HAPPENS TO THE FIREMEN. THE GOVERNMENT IS TIGHTENING UP ITS SCRUTINY OF PRODUCTIVITY DEALS TO HALT THE DRIFT TOWARDS ARTIFICIAL FORMULA AROUND THE PAY GUIDELINES. THE WAGE MODERATION POLICY IS STILL WORKING, WITH CONSERVATIVES, LIBERALS, GENERAL PUBLIC AND DOMINANT TRADE UNION SUPPORT. (JIM PRIOR, CONSERVATIVE EMPLOYMENT SPOKESMAN PRIVATELY STATES THAT IF SETTLEMENTS CONTINUE AT PRESENT LEVELS OR EVEN DRIFT SOMEWHAT HIGHER, THE GOVERNMENT WILL STILL BE ABLE TO REDUCE INFLATION TO A SINGLE DIGIT WITHIN THE NEXT YEAR). BUT MOST IMPORTANT HAS BEEN THE PERSONAL RESOLUTION OF PRIME MINISTER CALLAGHAN LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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WHO HAS HELD THE CABINET VIRTUALLY SOLID IN THE FACE OF NEEDLING PUBLIC, POLITICAL AND TRADE UNION PRESSURE, AND HAS DONE SO WITHOUT AN OPEN CONFRONTATION WITH THE UNIONS BY FORCING THROUGH THE MESSAGE THAT WORKERS WILL HAVE TO PAY THE PRICE OF WAGE-PRICE INFLATION.

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